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ABSTRACT

The state of English language instruction in Taiwan and its impact on firms doing business there are examined. The analysis draws on case studies of language training and use in four national and multinational corporations, each representing different nationalities and a different industry: Texas Instruments, Kaohsiung Monomer Company Limited, Bank of America, and Cheng-Yia International Corporation. First, English instruction in Taiwan and the major problems occurring in curriculum design, materials development, teaching methods, and teacher preparation are discussed. Second, the case study findings are presented, focusing on situations of language use and the existence of communication problems within the companies. Third, recommendations are made for language training and cross-cultural training programs to improve intercultural communication. (MSE)

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AN ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON BUSINESS PRACTICE IN TAIWAN

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An Analysis of English Language Education and Its Impact on Business Practice in Taiwan

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Introduction

English-language education is of increasing importance in Taiwan because of two major factors: (a) more multinational corporations (MNCs) are setting up and also expanding operations in Taiwan, and (b) a large number of Chinese firms are exporting to English-speaking markets and, of large significance to the U.S., sourcing in the U.S.

The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze the efficiency of English-language education in Taiwan and specifically, its impact on firms doing business in Taiwan. The paper will summarize the results of case studies conducted in the Summer 1986 during June and July. This paper will be presented in three major sections. The first section will provide an introduction in English education in Taiwan and its major problems in English-language teaching in terms of curriculum design, material development, teaching methodologies, and teacher preparation. The second section then provides a summary of the basic findings of our research in the summer 1986. The same focus on reporting the situations of language use and the existence of communication difficulties among the four firms to illustrate the easy use in practical and real business world. Since each firm represents different nationalities and is in a different industry, the situations of language use and communication problems are varied. In this section, each firm will be discussed separately. This paper concludes with recommendations on language training and cross-cultural training programs to improve intercultural communication (these recommendations being designed to remedy the problem outlined earlier).

OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH EDUCATION IN TAIWAN

Introduction of English Education

In Taiwan all secondary-school students are required to take English. English-as-a-foreign language is a subject matter and studied from middle school throughout the high school. Students at middle school receive three hours instruction per week while high school students receive five hours a week. Unlike American school systems in which each school may play an active role in planning its own curriculum, schools in Taiwan must follow the curriculum outlined by National Bureau of Compilation and Translation.

Curricula in all of the subject matter and on different levels are stipulated and standardized by the Ministry of Education, a ministry which is in charge of the promotion and supervision of the nation's educational programs (China Yearbook, 1979, p. 107). Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Compilation and Translation, consists of committees for compilation and examination of textbooks, is responsible for the work of compilation, examination, inspection and translation of the textbooks and reference books for all levels of schools (China Yearbook, 1979, p. 257).

In the middle-school level, there is only one-version of English textbook for students in the nation; whereas, there are about three or four versions of high-school English textbooks available. Each high school has the right to choose its own textbook. Some high schools may choose two or three versions at one time and assign them to the students.

The content of the English textbook for beginning middle-school students mainly focuses on the phrases or dialogues for daily conversation. When the grades go on, the focus is on grammar. High-school English textbooks focus simply on reading comprehension and grammar. Aside from the stipulated English

textbook, each school has to choose its own grammar textbook(s). As for students at college levels, Freshman English is required for all students at Junior Colleges and universities. Universities or even instructors can choose their own reading materials. The freshman-English textbooks are usually American-published freshman-English readings. The purpose of the freshman-English is to enhance students' reading comprehension and to appreciate the literature.

Major Problems

Despite the amount of time, effort, and resources devoted to the study of English in Taiwan; however, Taiwanese (Chinese) usually charcterize themselves as "poor speakers of English." Most Taiwanese can hardly acquire the skills in oral and written, especially oral, and hardly have confidence to use English in actual communication situations. The primary reasons for causing such difficulty are (a) the inappropriate curriculum design and material development; (b) the widespread use of the grammar-translation method in teaching English; (c) the shortage of pre-and-in-service teacher preparation; and (d) the inadequacy of evaluation or examination systems such as the entrance examination.

Planning the English curriculum in Taiwan has presented definite problems. The purpose of learning English in the secondary school is for college entrance examination; while in college the purpose is for job mobility and for enrichment. In recent years, there has been a considerable improvement in the quality of junior high-school English textbooks. In particular, the practice component of texts has become increasingly more dialogue-oriented which is based on the audio-lingual theory--to focus on the production of language use. Theory of "practice makes perfect" is integrated in the material of the first year of the English textbook. The curriculum design, however, begins to focus on reading and grammar

and the standard grammatical base is the dominant organizational theme of the texts after the second year of English education throughout high school. Such inconsistency of curriculum development does cause problems in the learning of English.

Teaching methodology and teachers' English oral proficiency are the primary difficulty in causing ineffective English-language teaching in Taiwan. The grammar-translation method still dominates the whole language teaching field. According to the personal experience of being a teacher trainer in 1981, one of the authors was so astonished by those trainees' lack of English oral proficiency, despite coming from reputable middle or high schools and with 3 to 16 years of teaching experience. It was sort of discouraging that the major teaching is just a reproduction of bad tradition. Many trainees (teachers) just teach the way they were taught. It was (is) hard for teachers to motivate themselves to spend more time and effort to learn how to use new teaching methodology, especially when there is little tangible incentive for them to do so. Moreover, the lack of English oral proficiency may discomfort them and make them feel insecure in front of students.

The examination system is another major factor. Learning English is to prepare for entrance examinations. These examinations test knowledge of English, but they focus on translation and on point of grammatical competence; that is, to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances (Swain & Canale, 1981, p. 49). For various reasons, these tests do not measure proficiency in spoken English. Students' final goal may be merely the passing of a university entrance-examinations, for which the mastery of paper-pencil tests and translations are required. In such a society like Taiwan, passing the examination is the priority, and that is the way people judge teachers' success.

The examination directs teaching and curriculum design. The Teacher's job is to teach students how to do well in the pencil-paper tests instead of teaching them how to use the language. Unfortunately, unless examinations change, grammar-translation teaching methods will be still "a necessary evil" for quite awhile.

Summary of Findings on the Situation of Language Use and the Existence of Communication Difficulties

Since the grammar-translation method has been used for decades, the majority of people in Taiwan graduate with an understandable command of English grammar and some reading comprehension. With such kind of practice, people in Taiwan hardly possess good command of oral proficiency in the English language. This is also confirmed and supported by our research in the summer of 1986 in which multi lingual language environments were studied. Communication patterns and language use were studied in 4 firms: Texas Instruments, Bank of America, Kaohsiung Monomer Co., Ltd., and Cheng-Yia International Corp. The major findings of the research is that communication difficulty was largely associated with spoken English. The following will explain the interaction of language use and communication difficulties among these four national-multinational firms operating in Taiwan.

In working environments like Texas Instruments (TI), second language skills are essential. Most Chinese personnel must integrate their technical work projects with other TI engineering, research, manufacturing, and marketing personnel outside Taiwan. The accommodating language in all these communications is English. As personnel down to the first-level engineers are involved in technical projects, the worldwide work-flow relationships inherently demand the use of English and consequently develop a force toward increasing English skills. Although TI Chinese personnel possess the highest English proficiency, TI is the firm that

reputedly has the most communication difficulties. The major communication problems in TI are the situations such as weekly progress report, sharing technical information on the phone with other TI branches throughout the world, and immediate communication with superior about on-going project.

Unlike TI, the use of English in oral communication in Kaohsiung Monomer Co., Ltd. (KMC) is not as demanding and frequent as for TI Chinese personnel. However, the managerial and secretarial staff reported that about 85 to 90 percent of their correspondence is in English. Compared to their high frequent use of English in written communication, the spoken English is about 5 to 15 percent of business conversation. English is used at the weekly office meeting at which General Manager is present and in small group or one-to-one consultation with the General Manager. In general, the Chinese personnel in KMC do not live in a working environment that encourages and facilitates the development of their spoken English skills. The existence of communication problems in KMC are related to the British accent, slang, colloquial expressions, and different use of words between American English and British English.

At the Bank of America (BOA) Loan Division, the use of spoken English is largely confined in interaction with the American General Manager and the American clients (approximately 30%), and loan-approval meetings. English is used only with English-speaking customers or Bank personnel. Because the majority of loan business is associated with Chinese firms, the work situations in the BOA Loan Division can be characterized as Chinese-language environment with an overlay of English. At the BOA, the Chinese personnel's use of English is enough to maintain their proficiency level but not enough to refine and improve their English-language skills. Since most loan officers received American MBA degrees and possess a fair command of English, the communication problem in BOA Loan

Division mainly on issue discussions in the loan-approval meetings, instead of information sharing. The communication problems in BOA Loan Division are related to the appropriate use language in a business context such as disputing purpusading, agreeing and so forth.

As for Cheng-Yia International Corp., (CYIC), a Chinese-managed manufacturing firm, there is a very small percent of individuals - individuals in the Marketing Dept. and Production Manager, possessing varying degrees of oral-English and Japanese language competence. The overall environment does not promote the development of foreign-language competence except for those individuals who have contact with foreign-language speakers as part of their job functions. Although Chinese personnel in CYIC possess the least English proficiency among four firms, they have the least communication problems. The foreign languages are used only externally when having contact with suppliers and buyers. In general, major contract negotiations are conducted with the aid of interpreters.

Summing up the interaction of language use in both oral and written communication among four firms, it is apparent that all of the four firms face different tasks and experience various language-related communication difficulties. Of the communication deficiency, the most communication problems have to do with oral communication. Major reasons of oral communication barriers are related to accent, use of slang and colloquial expressions, rapid speech, over complicated vocabulary, and required immediate response.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the varying degrees of language interaction and the existence of different communication problems among four firms, it is concluded that the English proficiency is highly correlated with the frequency and needs of tasks,

and that the communication difficulties, by and large, are associated with spoken English.

In general, each Taiwanese individual graduating from high school receives at least six years of English education. Despite the amount of time and effort individuals devote to the study of English, many still cannot handle even very simple conversation. The inefficient English-language education in Taiwan was the result of inappropriate material development, inadequate teacher trainings to enhance teachers' oral proficiency and to provide teachers updated, creative and accelerative teaching methodologies. Based on the research and observation, this paper will conclude with suggestions for those multinational corporations to provide language and intercultural training programs.

Language Training:

The overall goal of language instruction needs to be focused on proficiency in the use of the target language; specifically, the ability to understand and use the language for active communication in both spoken and written language. Traditional teaching tends to focus on linguistic competence; that is, the ability to control the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language. Linguistic competence is a very important and necessary part of language learning; however, language learning is not simply the mastery of the discrete feature of target language. Learning a language is to learn how to use it in a social context. In language learning, we should not neglect another important component so called communicative competence--which is the ability to receive, understand, and produce comprehensive message suitable to different kinds of situations.

According to our research, 1986, most Chinese mid-to-upper-level managers possess good command of English competence. Thus, language training programs

should design to provide learners opportunity to put the discrete point of linguistic skills they have learned to practical real communication.

In language training, improvements for individual company or privately-run language schools are needed for the following areas:

a. Curriculum design and material development. With the traditional teaching in Taiwan, the majority of high-school or college graduates possess fair command of English in linguistic competence. Thus, the curriculum should be organized in a way that the situation, the topics and ideas with which the learners encounter in the daily life. Within the content, the elements of grammar can be reviewed or reinforced. Grammar does not need to be taught progressively from the simple to the complex. The materials should cover the events of home country and the foreign country. To be able to introduce or carry conversation on "home cultural baggage" is as important as learning the foreign events and culture.

b. Teacher Preparation & In-Service Training. In Taiwan, there is a misconception that only Americans can teach English well. The majority of private institutes tend to use the "instant American teachers" -- such as travelers or students without professional training. A person who speaks the language does not mean or guarantee to be the good language teacher. It is far more important to hire the non-native speakers who receive the professional training, speak fluent or nearly native-like language, and are aware of both host and foreign cultures. As for those privately-run language institutions, providing in-service training such as seminars and workshops are very important and essential to keep teachers abreast in the field and enhance their language skills.

c. Teaching Methodology. The theories of teaching methodology has been more advanced than its application in the classroom settings. In the conventional way of teaching, most teachers pay most attention to "teacher talk."

If language instruction is to have a maximum impact on the language proficiency of students, teaching language should emphasize on the effective classroom activities to develop communicative competence. The methodologies are such as Suggetopedia, Total Physical Response, or Natural Approach. In teaching, these approaches or methods aim at developing a functional ability in the use of language rather than developing the mastery of a single grammatical point, or linguistic skills. As far as methodologies are concerned, it appears that most language theorists believe that a variety of techniques should be utilized and integrated to facilitate language learning naturally with emphasis on communicative competence and realistic utterance.

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